

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Come Out Festival 2005

Come Out, the Australian Festival for Young People has been showcasing new work for more than thirty years and its achievement is impressive. For much of that time, Come Out was not just the leading festival for young people in Australia, it was the only one - and an important opportunity, through forums, performances and collegial exchange, to take a look at the state of the arts for audiences ranging from pre-school to late adolescence.

In 2005 Artistic Director Sally Chance has again brought together all the many aspects of Come Out - schools touring, outreach programs, Allwrite the literature and creative writing branch - as well as theatre, music and dance. It is an ambitious brief and includes many thousands of children across the state.

As in many areas of the arts, there is a sense in the 2005 Come Out that, ever increasingly, more has to be delivered with fewer resources. This year's theatre program, while substantial, listed only one international event when previously there have been more. In past festivals companies like Gruppe 38 and Theatre Kazenoko Kansai, while not always better calibre than Australian works, offered useful points of comparison in style and purpose. This year's import - in fact a co-production between Denmark's Baggard Teatret and Puzzle Productions from NSW - featured Torkild Lindebjerg as *Stoneface*, a tribute to Buster Keaton, directed by Brian Joyce, using music, mime, battered suitcases and an over-active fog machine to create a skilful but somewhat hackneyed exercise in sad clowning.

Among new Australian works, the very young audience was well-served by local companies Windmill and Patch. Using the daffy illustrations of Judy Horacek and reading expert Mem Fox's wonderfully unfurling story, Windmill actors Noni Dunstone, Rick Magarey, Guy Peterson and musician Fleur Green narrated with song and dance, delight and surprise, the tale of *The Green Sheep* to a little wooden stockyard full of kids, parents, teachers and the green at heart.

And, at the Odeon Theatre, Patch director Dave Brown again showed his flair for adapting favourite children's books for the stage. In the past it has

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been Pamela Allen, this time he and his talented collaborators have taken the books and characters of Stephen Michael King and created *Emily Loves to Bounce*, an inventive, visually pleasing work using boxes and balls, light and illusion to captivate young imaginations. Astutely performed by Astrid Pill and John Bode with musicians Zoe Barry and Belinda Gehlert, *Emily* not only bounced, she offered a glimpse of further works to come from Patch and illusionist Greg Cousins.

One of the big challenges for *Come Out* is to gain cred with the teenage resistance, those posers of year nine and ten boys who hate theatre and sit up the back at schools audiences waiting to throw a brick through the fourth wall. There have been some excellent productions in past festivals which have had just such young audiences bug-eyed with attention - Zeal's *The Stones* was one such event, as was their later work, *Mouse*. Fresh Track Company's *The Return*, a play by Perth writer Reg Cribb, in the 2003 *Come Out*, was definitely another.

This year, the Fresh Track *Return* team is back with *Marathon*. Written by Edoardo Erba, and translated into some very salty English by Colin Teevan, *Marathon* provided both challenge and reward to high school audiences. Staged at the Queens Theatre by director Geordie Brookman, the play features two friends training for the New York marathon. Steve (Alistair Scott-Young) is the determined stoic while Mark (at my performance, played by understudy Roman Vaculik) is the reluctant slacker.

Performed at a perpetual jogging pace, the play is arduous for the actors - after several nights, one of them, Andrew Brackman, had to be rested for bruised feet - and for audiences, demanding in its implication. The tough language troubled many at the schools matinee I attended, and the play is meant to be confronting. But as the dialogue explored wider themes of life and purpose, and things suddenly got spookily other-worldly, we found ourselves all drawn into this excellent theatrical workout together.